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SMALL FARMS

IN NEW YORK

OLAF F. LARSON



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THE farms of New York State have been under change as farm people have responded to new developments, both farm and non-farm. These include mechanization, increased knowledge about agriculture, market demands, and non-farm opportunities. New York agriculture has moved far toward efficiency and productive use of land and labor and toward specialization.

What is the small farm situation in view of these general changes?

This report, which summarizes the "small farm" situation in New York State, shows the number and distribution of both small and large farms, and tells something of the characteristics of small farms and of their operators, as well as something about the living conditions of the families on these farms and some of the important changes.

The information comes mainly from the 1954 United States Census of Agriculture and from earlier Census reports.¹ Definitions and classifications are consequently related to those used by the Census.

A Small Farm

THE term "small farm" may have many interpretations. Whether a farm is "small" or "large" is a relative matter. Farms that most New York farmers might call "small" would seem "large" to a farmer in India or Italy or the Scandinavian countries. A "large" New York farm might be considered small by a wheat farmer in the Great Plains or by a cattle rancher in the Rocky Mountain area of the United States. Changing agricultural technology, affecting the amount of work a man can do in a day with equipment such as a tractor, is constantly changing ideas about what is a small or a large farm.

Several different measures of farm size may be used.

Economic Classes

The **economic class** as developed for census purposes is used in this report. This classification is based on three considerations, for a particular year: (1) total value of all farm products sold, (2) number of days the farm operator worked off his own farm for pay or wages, and (3) the relation-

¹Data on farms by economic class are based on a sample consisting of 20 percent of all farms plus all large farms meeting specified criteria. The Census has expanded this sample to give estimated totals by economic class for each county and for the State. Hamilton and the five New York City counties are omitted in all statements of county situations.

ship of the income received from all non-farm sources by the operator and members of his family to the value of all farm products sold.

The Census has first divided farms into two major groups and these in turn have been divided into nine economic classes on the basis of these three factors.

Commercial farms

The first group is made up of what are called "commercial" farms. In general, all farms with a value of *sales* of farm products amounting to \$1200 or more during a given year (as 1954) are called *commercial farms*. In addition, farms with sales of \$250 to \$1199 are classified as commercial if the farm operator worked off the farm *fewer* than 100 days during the year or if the income of the operator and his family from non-farm sources was *less* than the value of farm products sold during the year. These commercial farms are divided into six *economic classes*, five of which are based entirely on value of sales. The classes are designated by number, I through VI, as shown in table 1.

Other farms

All farms that are not commercial are divided into three groups: (1) part-time, (2) residential, and (3) abnormal.

A *part-time* farm has the same value of sales as an economic Class VI farm, \$250 to \$1199, but the operator either (1) worked off the farm 100 or more days during the year or (2) the non-farm income received by him and members of his family was greater than the value of farm products sold.

A *residential* farm is one that had a value of sales of farm products less than \$250 during a given year. The off-farm work of the operator or the non-farm income is *not* considered in the classification of a residential farm.

The *abnormal* farms, too few in number to be discussed here, include all public and private institutional farms, experiment-station farms, and the like.

Small farms defined

For the purposes of this report *small farms* are four of the nine economic classes which have been developed for census purposes. These four are Class V and VI commercial farms, part-time farms, and residential farms. Class V and VI farms are "low-production" farms.

Some warning should be given about the interpretation of the small farm: (1) *Certain operators of small farms are not primarily dependent upon agriculture*; for some, the major occupation or the major source of income is non-agricultural. (2) *Small farms are not identical with low-income farm families*. Some large farms have low net incomes. Although all small farms as defined here had a value of sales of farm products of less than \$2500 during a particular year, information on neither the net farm income nor the amount of income available to the family from non-farm sources is available. It is important

Table 1. New York Farms by Economic Class, 1954

Economic Class of Farm (with value of farm products sold)	Number	Percentage of All Farms
<i>Commercial farms:</i>	77,315	73.2
Class I (\$25,000 or more)	3,604	3.4
Class II (\$10,000 to \$24,999)	14,970	14.2
Class III (\$ 5,000 to \$ 9,999)	22,988	21.7
Class IV (\$ 2,500 to \$ 4,999)	19,026	18.0
Class V (\$ 1,200 to \$ 2,499)	11,789	11.2
Class VI (\$ 250 to \$ 1,199)*	4,938	4.7
<i>Other farms:</i>	28,356	26.8
Part-time (\$250 to \$1,199)*	11,388	10.8
Residential (less than \$250)*	16,831	15.9
Abnormal*	137	0.1
<i>All small farms</i>	44,946	42.6
<i>All other farms</i>	60,725	57.4
Total	105,671	100.0

* See text for other qualifications.

to realize that the income from the farm as a production unit and the income available to the family as a consumption unit may be much different. (3) *The classification of a farm into a particular economic class applies to a particular year.* For some farms, this may be a particularly good year or a bad year. Changes in prices and yields affect the classification of a farm. Also, any under-reporting of farm sales to the Census enumerator tends to increase the number of farms classified as small.

A knowledge of the general direction of change over the past half-century helps to understand the present small-farm situation. Therefore, a few of the major changes for New York farms as a whole since 1900 are discussed here:

Changes in New York Farms Since 1900

THAT the number of farms in the State has been rather steadily declining since 1900 is shown in figure 1. During this half-century, 121,000 farms have disappeared as the number has gone from 227,000 down to 106,000.

These numbers are affected by the definition of a farm used for the Census of Agriculture. In 1950 and 1954, places of 3 or more acres were counted as farms if the annual value of agricultural products (for home use or sale but exclusive of home-garden products) amounted to \$150 or more. Places of less than 3 acres were counted as farms only if the annual value of *sales* of agricul-

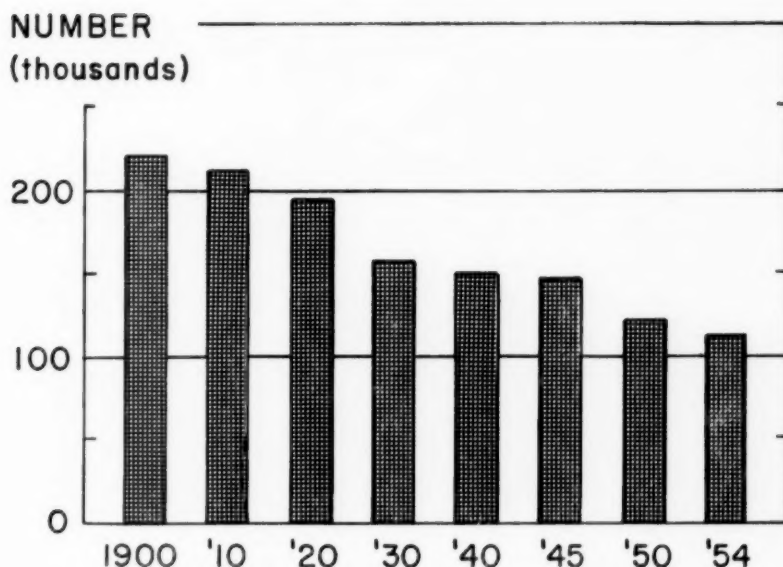


Figure 1. Number of New York Farms, 1900 to 1954

tural products amounted to \$150 or more. This was a stricter definition than that used for the 1945 and earlier censuses, so some of the decrease in number of farms shown for 1950 and 1954 is accounted for by changes in the Census definition of a farm.

Along with the decrease in number of farms has been a decline in the acreage of land included in these farms as shown in figure 2. By 1954 the acreage had dropped to 15 million, as compared with 22.6 million in 1900. Land has shifted from farm to non-farm use at the rate of about 140,000 acres a year during the past half century.

The number of people living on farms has also been decreasing, although exact information is available only for the period 1920 to 1950. By 1950, the farm population of 577,654 accounted for less than 4 percent of the New York State population. Many of these farm residents gained their living from non-farm sources.

While these decreases in number of farms, in land in farms, and in number of farm people have been taking place, total production of agricultural products has increased rather steadily.

Distribution of Farms by Economic Class

SMALL farms, as defined for this report, accounted for more than two out of every five New York farms in 1954, nearly 43 percent. Nearly 17,000,

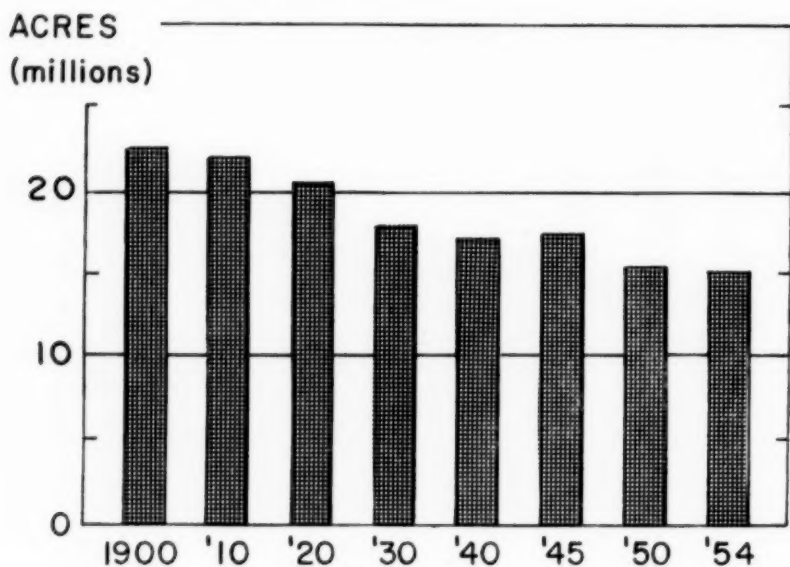


Figure 2. Land in New York Farms, 1900 to 1954

or 16 percent, of the total are *residential* farms; more than 11,000, or 11 percent, are *part-time*; and less than 17,000, or 16 percent, are *low-production commercial* farms (Classes V and VI). The number and percentage of farms in the other economic classes are given in table 1. It is clear that small farms continue in large numbers.

Changes from 1950 to 1954

Small farms, like all but those in Classes I and II, decreased in number between 1950 and 1954. The smallest commercial farms (Class VI) had the largest percentage decrease, 32 percent. Among other commercial farms the rate of loss in numbers tapered off progressively as scale of operations increased (table 2). Part-time farms incurred a 27 percent loss. Residential farms decreased by 20 percent despite population growth in the suburban fringe and in many open-country areas within commuting distance of cities. Apparently many suburbanites decided to give up agricultural production for sale.

The greater rate of decline of small farms meant that such farms were a smaller share of the total in 1954 than in 1950, 43 percent as compared with 47 percent. During these years New York agriculture was clearly continuing to move in the direction of becoming a more specialized occupation.

Table 2. Change in New York Farms by Economic Class, 1950 to 1954

Economic Class of Farm	Number	Percent
<i>Commercial farms:</i>	—10,652	—12
Class I	919	34
Class II	1,420	10
Class III	—3,649	—14
Class IV	—3,887	—17
Class V	—3,160	—21
Class VI	—2,295	—32
<i>Other farms:</i>	—8,457	—23
Part-time	—4,149	—27
Residential	—4,300	—20
Abnormal	—8	—5
<i>All small farms</i>	—13,904	—24
<i>All other farms</i>	—5,205	—8
Total	—19,109	—15

Residential Farms

Some persons may not include the nearly 17,000 residential farms in their image of a farm. Such farms accounted for less than $\frac{1}{2}$ of 1 percent of all farm products sold in 1949. Other income of the family exceeded the value of farm products sold on 70 percent of these farms during 1954. These farms fall, however, within the Census definition of a farm.

Residential farms are distributed throughout the State. They account for less than 10 percent of all farms in twelve widely scattered counties but for about one-third or more in five counties (Chemung, Fulton, Saratoga, Warren, and Westchester). Counties are shown in figure 3 according to whether they are above or below the state average of 16 percent residential farms.

All but one of the ten upstate counties with a city of 50,000 or more population are above the state average in percentage of residential farms. The above-average counties are not limited to those having such metropolitan centers.

Residential farms exceeded 500 in number in 1954 in ten counties, five of which had a city of 50,000 or more.

Changes from 1950 to 1954

The number of residential farms decreased by more than 4000 between 1950 and 1954, while such farms also decreased as a percentage of all farms. The loss in number was shared by all but eight counties (Cayuga, Chemung, Gen-

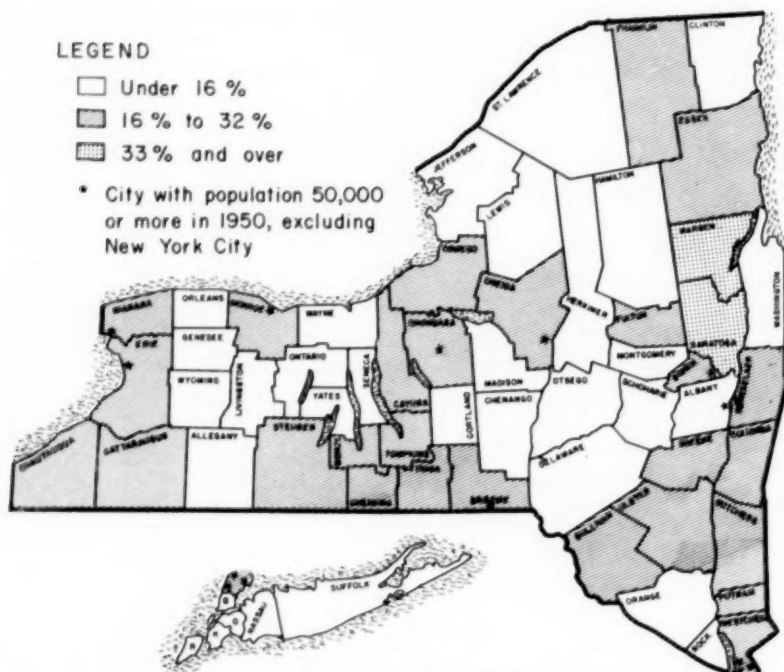


Figure 3. Residential Farms as a Percentage of All Farms, 1954
State total, 16,831; State average, 16 percent

esee, Monroe, Niagara, Saratoga, Warren, and Yates). The loss as a percentage of all farms was shared by all but fifteen counties distributed throughout the State.

Part-Time Farms

Part-time farms accounted for 1½ percent of all farm products sold from New York farms in 1949. For more than 85 percent, other income of the family exceeded the value of farm products sold in 1954.

Part-time farms are distributed throughout the State. The range in proportion of part-time farms among counties is less than the range for residential farms. Part-time farms accounted for less than 5 percent of all farms in three counties, up to 18 percent in two counties. Counties are shown in figure 4 according to whether they are above or below the state average of 11 percent part-time farms.

Seven of the ten counties with cities of 50,000 or more are at or above the state average in percentage of part-time farms. But the above-average counties are not limited to those with metropolitan centers.



Figure 5. Part-time Farms, 1954
State total, 11,388

All counties of New York had low production farms in 1954. Such farms ranged from less than 10 percent of all farms in three counties to a high of 25 percent in a single county. The location of counties above and below the state average is shown by figure 6.

Five of the ten counties with metropolitan centers were at or above the state average in percentage of low-production farms. Close access to non-farm employment has not prevented the persistence of small farms near large cities.

Low-production farms exceed 500 in number in eight counties, all of which are also above the state average in the proportion of such farms. Two of the counties include cities of 50,000 or more (figure 7).

Changes from 1950 to 1954

The number of low-production farms dropped off more than 5000 between 1950 and 1954. At the same time they decreased as a proportion of all farms. Nearly all counties shared in the decrease in number of low-production farms. The number of counties with 500 or more low-production farms dropped from

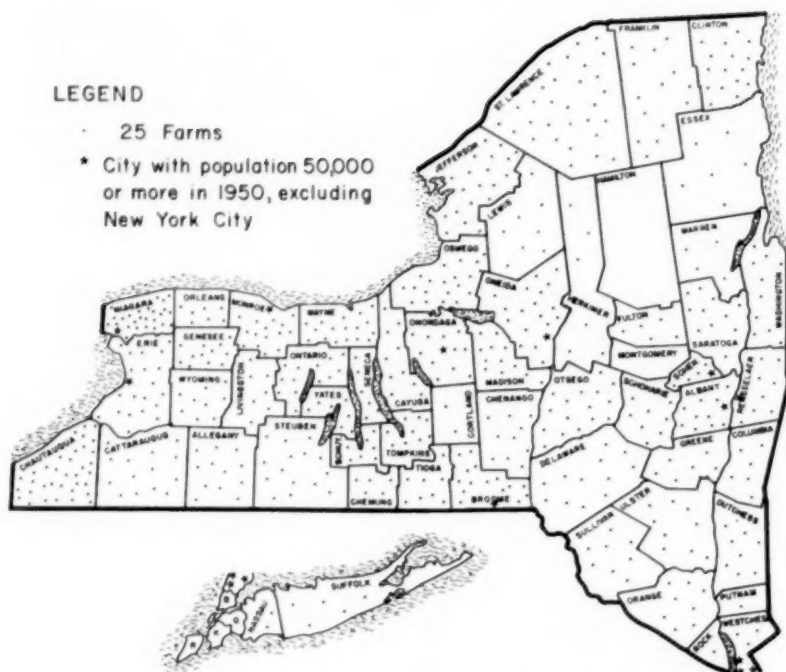


Figure 7. Low-production Farms, 1954
State total, 16,727

Operators

The characteristics of the operators of these farms affect any estimate of the number who have substantial opportunity to increase their productivity as farmers if they choose to do so. Age and present use of time are particularly important in arriving at such estimates.

Small farms are operated by farmers of all ages. But Class VI farmers are older men. They average nearly 60 years of age, 40 percent of them are more than 65, and only 15 percent are under 45 (table 3). None of them work as much as 100 days at non-farm work.

Class V farms are operated by younger men, although they are not so young as the average commercial farmer. Almost one-fourth, 23 percent, are more than 65 years of age, but nearly one-third are still under 45. Because nearly one-half of these work off the farm at least 100 days a year, many may not consider farming as their major occupation. Actually, many are part-time farmers with enough farm income to put them in Class V.

Part-time farmers are the youngest of these groups. Only 15 percent are

Table 3. Specified Characteristics of Operators of Part-time, Low-production, and All Commercial Farms, New York

Item	Part-time Farms	Low-production Farms		All Commercial Farms
		Class V	Class VI	
Average age (1950)	49	52	59	50
Percent 65 or more (1950)	15	23	40	17
Percent less than 45 (1950)	40	31	15	35
Average years on present farm (1950)	12	16	21	16
10 years or more on present farm—percent (1950)	42	53	64	57
Working off-farm 100 or more days—percent (1954)	81	45	0	19

more than 65 years of age and 40 percent are under 45. Eight out of ten spend at least 100 days at work off their farm.

On the whole, each of these groups of farmers has a record of stability of residence. Almost two-thirds of the Class VI farmers have lived at least ten years on their present farm. They average 21 years on the same place. And even 42 percent of the part-time farmers, who are the youngest, have lived on their present place at least ten years.

Farm Resources

The average value of farm products sold is small (table 4). Most small farms are owned rather than rented.

Class V and Class VI farms differ in their land resources and in the use of the land. Class V farms are larger by 21 acres. They have a larger part of the farm in crops. Class V farms have a higher average value of land and buildings and are worth more per acre.

Classes V and VI farms differ in the source of power used. Three-fourths of those in Class V have a tractor, as compared with one-half of those in Class VI. The balance use horses, hire the work done, or do no field work. Both depend largely on family labor. About three-fourths of both are on good roads.

Part-time farms are smaller and have less cropland than low-production commercial farms. The investment in land and buildings is greater than that for Class VI farms and more of them have a tractor. Part-time farms are like low-production farms in their location on good roads and in their dependence on family labor.

Table 4. Specified Farm Resources, by Economic Class, New York

Item	Part-time Farms	Low-production Farms		All Commercial Farms
		Class V	Class VI	
Average value of farm products sold— <i>dollars</i> (1949)	610	1,866	809	7,145
Average land in farms— <i>acres</i> (1954)	68	104	83	172
Average cropland harvested— <i>acres</i> (1954)	17	34	21	68
Average value land and buildings— <i>dollars</i> (1954)	9,278	10,473	7,925	17,367
All tenants— <i>percent</i> (1950)	*	6	4	7
Reporting a tractor— <i>percent</i> (1954)	66	74	49	85
Located on hard-surface or gravel road— <i>percent</i> (1950)	79	79	75	80
Family workers, including operator, <i>as percent all workers</i> (week of September 26 to October 2, 1954)	89	81	89	57

*Not given.

These averages cover up the wide range of resources one actually finds within each group of small farms. But the averages do help to explain the differences in production found on small as compared with all commercial farms.

Family Living Facilities

The three groups of small farms differ considerably from each other in the material level of living provided by their production efforts as measured by the presence of certain facilities in the home. Part-time farms have the highest percentage with telephone, piped running water, home freezer, and television. Class VI farms have the smallest percentage with these items, with electricity and with an electric washing machine. None of the small farm homes are so well provided with these living facilities as are commercial farms as a group. The part-time farms, however, come very close to being as well off as those of commercial farmers (table 5).

Other and more detailed characteristics for each economic class of farm for the State as a whole and for each "economic area" within the State, but not for counties, may be found in the *1950 United States Census of Agriculture*, Volume I, Part 2, and in the *1954 Census of Agriculture*, Volume I, Part 2.

Table 5. Family Living Facilities, by Economic Class of Farm, New York

Item	Part-time Farms	Low-production Farms		All Commercial Farms
		Class V	Class VI	
Electricity—percent (1954)	97	97	93	98
Telephone—percent (1954)	81	76	64	85
Piped running water— percent (1954)	84	79	67	87
Home freezer—percent (1954)	44	39	26	51
Television set—percent (1954)	72	63	45	68
Electric washing machine— percent (1950)	83	83	65	87

Summary and Interpretation Number

Small farms continue to account for a large number of New York farms. All types of small farms combined—residential, part-time, and low-production commercial—numbered about 45,000 in 1954. They included nearly 43 percent of all farms. The number and percentage of small farms decreased between 1950 and 1954. This change is in accord with the long-time trend in New York and the United States for the number of all farms to decline and for agriculture to become more specialized.

Major Characteristics

The small farm situation in New York has three outstanding characteristics.

1. Small farms are dispersed throughout the State rather than heavily concentrated in certain areas. This is true despite the fact that some counties do have a higher proportion of such farms than do others. This characteristic is markedly in contrast with that for the nation as a whole, which has a high concentration of small farms in some areas.

2. The different economic classes of small farms differ distinctly from each other. They differ in resources and therefore in their present potentialities within agriculture. They differ in the characteristics of their operators, such as age. They differ in the facilities for family living which have been acquired. Although not available from Census sources, more limited research studies have shown differences in such respects as use of recommended farm practices and in sources of information about new things in farming.

3. Although not revealed directly by Census records, other research and

observation suggests that, within each category of small farms, the operators and their families are a heterogeneous group. They have a wide range of wishes, of what they value, and as to what function they want the farm to have in their life. Some low-production farmers are young men seeking to get successfully established in agriculture on an efficient, productive basis. Some are semi-retired or approaching retirement and cutting down on their agricultural pursuits. Some have handicaps which are barriers to more productive use of their labor.

Of the part-time farmers, some are on their way out of farming; some are on their way into farming; some are preparing for retirement; and some are consciously trying to strike a balance between a non-farm job and country living.

Aid for Farmers

Some farmers have problems in choosing from the various alternatives open to them how best to use their labor and resources. It is important that they make wise decisions. Regardless of whether the end decision is to stay in farming, to leave farming, or to strike a balance between farm and non-farm work, a farmer on a small farm, like all farmers, has many sources to which to turn for information, counseling, credit, technical advice, and the like. Some sources are private, some are public. Some of the many public sources, most of which are available within each county of the State, are the following:

Cooperative Extension Service (county agricultural agent, home demonstration agent and 4-H agent); Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service; Farmers Home Administration; Farm Credit Administration; State Conservation Department; Soil Conservation Districts; Soil Conservation Service; State Employment Service; Social Security Administration; Adult education programs in public schools.

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Cooperative Extension Service, New York State College of Agriculture at Cornell University and the U. S. Department of Agriculture cooperating. In furtherance of Acts of Congress May 8, June 30, 1914. M. C. Bond, Director of Extension, Ithaca, New York.